

The heroic shameful role of labour: Mythology in the making of White Australia

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For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, the Labor Party boasted that the labour movement had played a central role in creating the White Australia policy, and the popular media legitimised that claim. But when historians and activists decided that White Australia had been a racist policy, labour's triumph was simply converted into labour's shame. This paper will contest the mythology of White Australia as a labour movement creation, focusing on the famous Seamen's strike of 1878-79 against the replacement of European crews with Chinese sailors. It will look at both ruling class opinion in general and the conservative press in Queensland in particular.

ONE of the enduring themes of Australian political history is the supposed responsibility of the labour movement for exclusionary racism in Australia. It is, in my view, a myth, but a myth that sections of the labour movement, and the Labor Party itself, were very keen to promote for nearly a century. James Scullin, Labor's Depression Prime Minister, declared that 'Labour is solid for a White Australia, and no amount of political propaganda will shake the people's faith in our party on that big national question.' According to wartime federal Labor minister, 'Stabber' Jack Beasley, 'We inherited the White Australia policy from our fathers and our grandfathers – It is our responsibility to see that it is there to be handed down by the great-grandchildren of our great-grandchildren.'¹ However, when opinion on the White Australia policy turned from the 1950s, Labor's boasting rapidly became labour's shame. As historian and activist, Ann Curthoys, put it, 'A major issue in the 1960s and 1970s...was whom to blame for its existence in the first place. The most common answer from historians had been the working class, the trade unions, and the Labor Party.'²

¹ Both quoted in Carlotta Ellis, 'Why does the A.L.P. support the "White Australia" Policy? (1855-1940)', MA thesis, Political Science, University of Melbourne, ?1950, p. 1.

² Curthoys, Ann, 'Racism and class in the nineteenth-century immigration debate' in Andrew Markus and MC Ricklefs (eds), *Surrender Australia? Essays in the study and uses of history: Geoffrey Blainey and Asian immigration*, George Allen & Unwin, North Sydney (NSW), 1985, p. 99.

There have been voices against this view. On the right, Charles Price, an apologist for White Australia, argued against the primary role of labour in its adoption.³ On the left, Verity Burgmann attacked the role of historians in promoting what she called the 'baloney' view in two important articles in the early 1980s.⁴ Sarah Gregson has written two important articles on the role of the right, and the RSL in particular, in promoting racist violence in Kalgoorlie and Broken Hill, and the importance of internationalism in maintaining strong unionism.⁵ But so far, this argument is still at the fringes. This in itself is remarkable, given the central role of the trade union movement in campaigning against discrimination in the workplaces since the late 1960s, the role of the Labor Party in passing the Racial Discrimination Act in 1975, and explicit racism of the Liberal party since its inception, and in particular since Geoffrey Blainey's attack on Asian immigrants in 1984.⁶

In this paper, I want to look at the class politics surrounding one of the pivotal events in the development of the consensus for limiting Chinese immigration, and ultimately adopting white Australia. This was the Seamen's strike of 1878-79. The argument that the anti-Chinese movement was a movement of labour against capital has gained perhaps its greatest legitimacy from this struggle.

The Seamen's strike was truly a major, even cathartic, event.⁷ The broader dispute began in July 1878, when the Australasian Steam Navigation Company (ASN), the largest shipping line in Australia and the largest private employer in Sydney, replaced 180 European sailors with Chinese workers. It developed into an all-out strike on 18 November 1878, when hundreds more European sailors were sacked.

³ *The great white walls are built: restrictive immigration to North America and Australasia 1836-1888*, Australian Institute of International Affairs in association with the Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1974. But even Price's account tended to emphasise, by its weight of narrative, the importance of working class and plebeian protest movements.

⁴ 'Capital and labour' in Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus (eds), *Who are our enemies? Racism and the Australian working class*, Hale and Iremonger in association with the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Neutral Bay (NSW), 1978, pp. 20-34; 'Writing racism out of history', *Arena* [first series], no. 67, 1984, pp. 78-92.

⁵ "'It all started on the mines'?: The 1934 Kalgoorlie race riots revisited', *Labour History*, no. 80, May 2001, pp. 21-40; 'Defending internationalism in interwar Broken Hill', *Labour History*, no. 86, May 2004, pp. 115-36.

⁶ See esp. Andrew Markus, *Race: John Howard and the remaking of Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest (NSW), 2001.

⁷ The strike has been discussed in every major book treatment of the White Australia policy. Other significant treatments are: Ann Curthoys, 'Conflict and consensus: The seamen's strike of 1878' in Curthoys and Markus (eds), *Who are our enemies? Racism and the Australian working class*, Hale and Iremonger in association with the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Neutral Bay (NSW), 1978, pp. 48-65; Mother Pauline Kneipp, 'The seamen's strike-1878-1879: Its relation to the White Australia policy', *ANU Historical Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1965-6, pp. 14-18; Charles Jonathon McNeill Hayes, 'The seamen's strike 1878-79', BA (Hons) thesis, History, Macquarie University, 1970; Richard Fletcher, 'The role of the immigration question in gaining for the labour movement recognition by society in the period 1877 to 1890 in New South Wales', MA thesis, University of Sydney, 1964, pp. 106-66.

Most of ASN's remaining sailors walked off the job when their ships arrived in port, and they were joined by wharf labourers who refused to load and unload ASN ships. As the dispute escalated, coal miners in the Hunter and Illawarra refused to cut coal for ASN steamers, paralysing most of the fleet. ASN responded by attempting to recruit hundreds more strike breakers from Hong Kong.

Strike organising was centred in Sydney, and from the beginning, the Seamen's Union and the Sydney Trades and Labour Council treated it as both a normal industrial dispute and a struggle against Chinese immigration. Well before the strike began, populist and mainstream political organisations were organising a vast anti-Chinese movement in support of the seafarers. There were petitions – one with 14,700 signatures, constant public meetings, and anti-Chinese riots in Sydney, Bathurst, Tamworth, Rockhampton and other regional centres. ASN was finally defeated when the *SS Mecca*, bringing 350 Chinese workers, upon whom it was relying to restart operations, sank in Torres Strait, and the Queensland government stripped the company of its lucrative mail contract. Negotiations settled the strike on 3 January 1879, with a compromise that allowed the company to keep a proportion of its Chinese sailors. Despite this, ASN gradually got rid of them, but the strike so damaged the company that it was sold in the mid-1880s. This was by far the most significant industrial dispute in colonial Australia before the great strikes of the early 1890s.

Most historians have simply seen this as part of labour's great push for a white Australia. Ann Curthoys, in her short history of the strike – which is still the best published account – is more nuanced. She argues that organised labour 'was the logical leader of opposition to the Chinese as economic competitors with European workers,' but that:

In so far as the anti-Chinese movement went beyond the specific cheap labour issue into the realm of social, political, moral, race-purity, and general economic complaints against the Chinese themselves, labour's leadership was augmented by small employer, self employed, and general middle class concern.⁸

Larger capitalists were, she argued, were also racist towards Chinese people in wanting the opportunity to super-exploit them under systems of indenture, but they did not want them excluded. One of the impacts of the strike was to weaken 'capital's interest in Chinese as a source of cheap...labour,' and this 'was a precondition for the emergence of a nationally supported White Australia policy.'⁹

I think this view is demonstrably wrong about New South Wales, but it falls apart when you look at Queensland. In 1878, there was only the most rudimentary labour movement in Queensland – a few members of the Seamen's Union, miners unions,

⁸ Curthoys, *Conflict and consensus*, p. 65.

⁹ Curthoys, *Conflict and consensus*, p. 65.

and a few other small union bodies. There was no trades and labour council, and the labour movement had no independent presence.

Yet in 1877, the Queensland parliament, still dominated by squatters, had passed the colony's first Chinese immigration restriction act. Not only that, but the unelected Legislative Council, the bastion of pastoral and commercial wealth, was more militant on the issue than the elected Legislative Assembly, passing a series of amendments to make the act more restrictive and repressive.

Queensland politics was sharply divided between urban liberals and a variety of elements which grouped together into a Conservative party behind Thomas McIlwraith. These included sugar planters, squatters, some bankers and mining capitalists. In general, these elements supported the organised importation of indentured Pacific Islanders for the sugar industry, and less enthusiastically, for the pastoral industry. But this support did not extend to Chinese immigration.

The conservatives in Queensland opposed Chinese immigration on the ground that Chinese people could potentially represent a strategic threat to their control of the colony. Chinese people could become the majority in the north, and then the Chinese empire could pressure Britain over how they were to be governed. They were also concerned that Chinese immigration would impede British colonisation of the southern half of the colony. This was a uniquely ruling class agenda, and it was reflected throughout debates that led to the passing of the 1877 bill. It was often expressed in similar terms as labour concerns – as the danger of Chinese competition with European labour. This was not an opposition to competition in the labour market, but to anything that would undermine colonisation and a particular form of economic development.

Many conservatives and rich people also felt and expressed a crude racist antipathy to Asian people. This racism reflected the broader development of racism in the British imperial ruling class as it conquered and ruled vast areas of the world. It was connected to an awareness that racism amongst working class British people made them easier to control. This took a particular form in colonial Australia; a belief that an homogeneous society was necessary to maintain social order--a belief shared by liberals.¹⁰

So the rich and powerful had their own reasons for wanting to limit non-European immigration, and understanding those reasons is essential to understanding the pivotal role they played in the Seamen's strike. It helps us understand, for instance, why colonial newspapers were often saturated with racism. This was not an attempt to appeal to working class racism, but represented both the opinions of the editors

¹⁰ This is extensively argued in Phil Griffiths, 'The making of White Australia: Ruling class agendas, 1876-1888', PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2007, [online] thesis.anu.edu.au/public/adt-ANU20080101.181655/index.html

and writers, and a reflection of their desire to maintain a European population and keep them nice and racist.

This helps us understand why it was that virtually the entire newspaper press of Australia supported the seamen in their strike against ASN. The major newspapers were both very large businesses in their own right, and conscious advocates for the interests of colonial business and the empire that protected their commerce. Historians who see capital and capitalism as purely matters of trade and production, who adopt an 'economist' understanding and exclude the state and the dominant ideology from discussions of class and class structure, intrinsically adopt a perspective which 'naturalises' these institutions. The business of entrenching the British empire on the Australian continent was both an economic and strategic question for both the British and Australian colonial states, and for British and local capital.¹¹

This does not imply that a similar proportion of capitalists supported the strike – we simply cannot know this one way or the other. In part the problem is evidentiary; we have excellent archival collections of colonial newspapers, and very few records which tell us what businesspeople and investors thought. Newspapers, however, did not simply reflect local bourgeois opinion. They played a particular role in class society – as key actors in constructing and rationalising the hegemony of capital and the British empire, and as forums for the discussion of bourgeois strategy in nation-building and social development.

Of course, for the ruling class, the seamen's strike presented a sharp dilemma. They were, inherently, against strikes, but this one was different because it involved actions by one major business that threatened their broader strategic and national development goals. It was different, too, because one of the main principles the workers were fighting for was theirs – the defence of the Australian colonies as 'white', and based on British institutions.

Therefore it is also important to situate ruling class debate over the seamen's strike in its broader context, one in which 'social legislation' had become more and more important, a development that was hotly debated at the time. As Karl Polanyi has pointed out, from the 1860s onwards, legislation began to restrict, in modest ways, the rights of capital, whether it be through laws against child labour, impure food, laws regulating the loading of ships and safety at sea, or laws imposing an obligation on employers to provide a workplace that was not inherently dangerous.¹² The vast majority of ruling class newspapers believed that ASN had to be restrained – in perhaps the same way as a noxious industry.

¹¹ Luke Trainor, *British imperialism and Australian nationalism : manipulation, conflict, and compromise in the late nineteenth century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge & New York, 1994.

¹² Karl Polanyi, *Origins of our time: The great transformation*, V Gollancz, London, 1945, esp pp. 145-6.

Queensland's conservative newspapers

One of the most significant features of the strike in Queensland was the vigorous support given to it by many of the colony's leading conservative newspapers and politicians, including the *Brisbane Courier*, the colony's leading newspaper and the one most closely associated with pastoralists, business and the McIlwraith Conservatives in parliament. For Queensland's conservatives, the anti-Chinese dimension in the campaign against ASN was not a conflict between labour and capital, but a struggle to save British Australia, a national struggle in which a trade union had been forced to take the lead.

By contrast, Brisbane's liberal paper, *The Week*, opposed the strike, and took a position very similar to that of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. It described the strike as 'mutinous behaviour' and compared the strikers with machine-breakers.¹³ An article by 'an old trade-unionist' affirmed the right to strike, but condemned the strike itself. 'I don't want to see Chinese replacing English tars, but I'm sad the sailors have taken the wrong and illegal course. Public opinion will not be enough.'¹⁴ It is quite clear that the liberal paper saw, in the *Courier*'s support for the strike, an abandonment of some of the fundamentals of bourgeois order. The coverage of the anti-Chinese riot in Sydney on 4 December 1878 in *The Week* was entirely unsympathetic, and it accused the *Courier* of suppressing news of the riot. It therefore covered the riot extensively on the first opportunity, and kept covering it in the following issue, publishing reports from the *Sydney Evening News* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, presumably intending to make *Courier* readers uncomfortable.¹⁵ Ominously it warned:

An editor [of the *Courier*] who has recently indulged in the language of revolution and anarchy could hardly be expected to enjoy reading articles [in the *Sydney Morning Herald*], the burden of which is the maintenance of law and order, and the advantages of observing civil contracts.¹⁶

Once the new NSW Government of Sir Henry Parkes had made it clear it intended introducing legislation to restrict Chinese immigration, *The Week* supported it, arguing that without NSW legislation, the Queensland anti-Chinese laws would be less effective.¹⁷

But it's the attitude of Queensland's regional conservative newspapers that is most interesting.

¹³ *The Week* (Brisbane) 23 November 1878, p. 724 (editorial).

¹⁴ *The Week* 30 November 1878, p. 751.

¹⁵ *The Week* 7 December, pp. 787, 792, 788; 14 December, pp. 818-9.

¹⁶ *The Week* 7 December, p. 788.

¹⁷ *The Week* 28 December 78, p. 884.

In Townsville, the strike began during the election campaign, and candidates were challenged on their approach to the dispute. In a closely fought election, the successful Conservative candidate, John Deane, supported both the ASN strikers and the importation of Pacific Islanders for the sugar industry.¹⁸ With the election out of the way, the conservative *Townsville Herald* began a strident agitation against the ASN Company and its use of Chinese labour.¹⁹ It regarded most strikes as something to be 'deprecated', but there was a higher principle at work here – race:

The resistance of the seamen is founded not only on self interest, but on a social principle which is shared by all classes, whether employers or employed. The antipathies of race are inborn and not easily overcome, even by continued contact between opposite breeds. But when that contact is forced upon a civilised community to their detriment and positive loss it is only natural that the most christianlike spirit should rebel...²⁰

As with its southern contemporaries, the main thrust of the *Townsville Herald's* opposition to Chinese immigrants was that they potentially threatened European colonisation. It reprinted an anti-Chinese editorial from Ipswich's conservative *Queensland Times*,²¹ and, in its own major editorial, argued that, 'we may find that by force of numbers and by equality of privileges they shall attain to the position of a dominating party, and upset the whole scheme of European society, as it obtains with us.' To this end, the paper approved a major letter from 'Anglo Saxon', who rejected the common argument that the Chinese merely came to Australia to get gold and take home their wealth: 'the fact is that whatever land "John" immigrates [sic] to, he tries [sic] to become a resident, and there is no country in the world that offers such inducements to him as Australia.' In 'Anglo-Saxon's view, Chinese people had the capacity to take over: her merchants

are already ousting European and American merchants from the tea ports of China, they have possession of the greater part of the trade in Singapore and they have a line of steamers on the coast of China and eastern India competing successfully with British shipping.

If they were not stopped, they would push 'the white men out of the road until Australia becomes a vast Chinese nation'. Thus the seamen's strike 'is not a question of class against class, but a question of race against race'.²²

The *Herald* could tolerate Chinese people growing cabbages, or engaging in the 'effeminate' work of domestic labour so 'below the dignity of male European labour',

¹⁸ *Townsville Herald* 27 November 1878; this was the day of the election.

¹⁹ The paper explicitly identified itself with the politics of John Murtagh Macrossan, see *Townsville Herald* 23 October 1878.

²⁰ *Townsville Herald* 30 November 1878.

²¹ *Townsville Herald* 7 December 1878.

²² *Townsville Herald* 11 December 1878.

but not the replacement of good British sailors by 'a cheap draft of sickly, feint-hearted Mongolians' simply to swell 'the dividends of an already prosperous company'.²³ While the paper was proudly racist, it would not countenance what it saw as unreasonable slurs against the Chinese, and chided the *Brisbane Courier* when the latter blamed Chinese immigrants for small pox.²⁴ The *Herald* also found complications in the issue; the sensibilities of those in mining towns, of storekeepers who made a profit from the Chinese, and the need for 'keeping up of communication with the South'. After all, the strike was disrupting trade and business.²⁵ But this in no way softened its attitude towards ASN; when the company was finally defeated, it commented that, 'Outside the Board of Directors there are very few indeed who do not regard this attempt to flood our ports and vessels with Chinese seamen, as a most unjust and dangerous project.'²⁶ Once the election was decided, the town leadership held a public meeting, chaired by the newly-elected John Deane. Speaking honours were shared between Deane's supporters, and the defeated Liberal, Davey, and his supporters.

In Maryborough, the conservative *Chronicle* also came out in favour of the strike, arguing that the action of the ASN Company, in employing Chinese seafarers for their Queensland routes, represented a threat to the anti-Chinese legislative barrier erected in 1877 by the government:

If our mercantile marine is to be made up of Chinese sailors, firemen, lumpers, &c., — and this, eventually, it would come to, — all attempts to keep their numbers within controllable limits in the colony would be in vain, and we should have the spectacle of a private company riding rough-shod over the sentiments, the wishes, and the interests of a whole people.²⁷

The ruling class of Maryborough petitioned the Mayor to call a public meeting on the issue. The requisition was signed by the unsuccessful conservative candidate for Wide Bay, Edward Booker, and prominent supporters of both Liberal and Conservative candidates for Wide Bay and Maryborough at the recent election.²⁸ On the day of the public meeting, the paper ran a strident anti-Chinese editorial, defending the action of the strikers in breaking their contracts, their greatest crime in

²³ *Townsville Herald* 30 November 1878.

²⁴ *Townsville Herald* 21 December 1878.

²⁵ *Townsville Herald* 30 November 1878.

²⁶ *Townsville Herald* 4 January 1879.

²⁷ *Maryborough Chronicle*, 30 November 1878. The *Chronicle's* conservatism is demonstrated by its support for squatters and sugar planters against Liberals, and its support of anti-Douglas candidates in the 1878 election.

²⁸ Petition in *Maryborough Chronicle*, 5 December 1878. BB Moreton, a wealthy squatter of aristocratic lineage, was the (unsuccessful) Conservative candidate for the Maryborough seat. Among those who requisitioned his candidacy, George Stuart, John Graham, SC Davy, James Graham, John Hirst, James Cunningham, JE Noakes, GW Gaynor and TT Woodrow are listed in the petition for the anti-Chinese meeting. The requisition for Moreton to stand for Maryborough was published in the *Chronicle* on 3 October 1878.

the eyes of men of capital. This 'was unavoidable...for the protest against the action of the Company to be effective'. Had the seamen waited for their contracts to run out, 'their protest as individuals or in isolated groups would have been without weight or influence. Indeed, they would have been playing into the hands of the company' by allowing their places to be gradually and quietly filled by Chinese.²⁹ These were words to send a chill down any bourgeois spine.

Despite (or because of) this elite support, there were few present in the town hall at the nominated starting time, so the Mayor started the meeting half an hour late. Clearly, the conservative newspapers were not going along with some wildly popular cause in order to maintain their authority; they were attempting to make the running on the Chinese issue. The failed Conservative, Booker, moved the first motion, warning that, 'If they allowed the invasion of this race, who were worse than locusts, what would become of their children in time to come'. Booker drew strength – as did Conservatives generally – from the words of former New South Wales Premier, Sir James Martin, who urged his own parliament to resist what he claimed was a Chinese 'invasion' in 1861. 'Our shores are close to China, and in a few years they will land millions of them in the colony', he claimed. He denied any radical content to the struggle: 'It was not a fight of labor against capital, but a fight of labor against a pest'.³⁰

In Maryborough, as in other sugar towns along the coast, the issue of Chinese immigration invariably raised the most potent question of Islander labour in the plantations. For the Conservative Booker, 'the Polynesian was not in any way so obnoxious as this race'.³¹ For the Liberal Lowry, the action of ASN set a disturbing precedent: 'If the Company had a right to employ this kind of labor, so also had the planters and storekeepers'. EJ Hobson reminded his small audience that he had denounced cheap labour from the political platforms of Maryborough, and 'had then told them what would be the result, and he was sorry to see it being realised.' His solution was to boycott Chinese goods.

But Hobson's concerns were secondary in the Queensland agitation against ASN in 1878. For the ruling class generally, and the conservative newspapers and politicians in particular, the major issue was the competition between Britain and China to colonise the Australian continent, and this provided the context for all the disingenuous talk about Chinese competition pushing out European labour. The *Maryborough Chronicle* summed this up in an editorial in the middle of the strike:

We believe we have no one to convert when we state that should the laboring and middle classes, the working and trading population of the colony become,

²⁹ *Maryborough Chronicle* 5 December 1878.

³⁰ *Maryborough Chronicle* 7 December 1878.

³¹ Pacific Islander labourers were routinely, wrongly called Polynesian in colonial debates.

ultimately, Chinese, the work of colonization, as at present understood and fostered by the British race, would come to an end.³²

In Rockhampton, the Conservative agitation was relatively weaker, and was partly overshadowed by a late election, won by the Liberals, and a militant picket of the wharf when a crowd tried to stop the ASN ship, the *Boomerang*, from docking.³³ The conservative *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin* was hostile to the ASN action, and opposed to significant Chinese immigration, but was hesitant to support the strike. It saw Chinese people as inured to poverty and deprivation, and capable of out-competing Europeans and threatening British colonisation; thus 'when their immense numbers are taken into account, it becomes evident that unless precaution is taken there is some danger of these colonies being overrun by Chinese to an alarming extent.'³⁴ The initiative for a public meeting against ASN was not in the paper's hands; nevertheless, it was a bipartisan affair as elsewhere, with Conservatives as well as Liberals introducing the motions. The most racist offering of the evening came from the prominent Conservative, Albrecht Feez, a close friend of Sir Arthur Palmer and a Rockhampton Alderman, soon to be MLA for Leichhardt—who raised the spectre of European colonisation under threat from Chinese numbers and Chinese debauchery:

We have to deal with the fact of a country with 500,000,000 of people, being within only a few days' sail of our shores, needy to send its teaming [sic] and needy population amongst us...there was one objection to their extensive introduction far more serious, and that was, on the ground of morality. (Cheers.) There was one house in San Francisco which contained 1700 Chinamen—a house not having room enough for seventy Europeans—and the immoralities that existed in that house must be something fearful.³⁵

One of the aims of the Conservative party and conservative press was to keep the issues of Chinese immigration and Pacific Island labour separate. Rockhampton was one place that saw a meeting held to establish an anti-Chinese and anti-Kanaka League. The composition of the speaking list was far removed from that of the anti-Chinese public meeting, being far less elevated and more narrowly Liberal.³⁶

³² *Maryborough Chronicle* 12 December 1878.

³³ The crowd was led by a local publican, James Manly, who was charged with attempting to incite a riot. Manly was clearly present in a leading role, reflecting again that where there was plebeian agitation against Chinese people, it was so often led by storekeepers and publicans. Manly was acquitted. See *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin* 28 November 1878.

³⁴ *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin* 27 November, 1878.

³⁵ *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin* 29 November 1878. For Feez and Palmer, see Bill Thorpe, *Colonial Queensland: Perspectives on a frontier society*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia (Qld), 1996, p. 156-63.

³⁶ *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin* 12 December 1878.

But it was in Ipswich that the gulf between the myth of labour movement leadership, and the reality of ruling class dominance, is greatest. Ipswich was home to the *Queensland Times*, edited by John Irwin, a paper which had a reputation as one of Queensland's most conservative, pro-squatter publications.³⁷ As soon as the seamen's strike broke out, the *Queensland Times* moved to support it. The issue for the paper was the threat posed by Chinese immigration to British and European colonisation of Queensland:

Already in Sydney and in Brisbane they have nearly monopolised cabinet-making, and have driven the white men engaged in that trade either to seek work at other occupations, or to leave both colonies. Unless some check is placed upon them, Chinamen will ultimately monopolise most of our industrial occupations, and thousands of our fellow-countrymen will be shoved out of the land which they have adopted as the home of themselves and their children.³⁸

The paper believed that as the struggle grew, 'repressive legislation against the Chinese' would be needed in both Queensland and New South Wales.³⁹ On 3 December 1878, the paper demanded that the Liberal government of John Douglas 'terminate the strike in favour of the men...by giving six months' notice of the termination of all mail contracts', which the government did, in an act which largely contributed to the company's defeat. In that defeat, the paper rejoiced.⁴⁰

As elsewhere, there was a public meeting in support of the striking seafarers. It was initiated when the Brisbane organising committee wrote to William Ginn, a prominent Ipswich merchant, company director and municipal councillor, asking him to take action in support of the seafarers.⁴¹ This, in itself, reveals the lack of contact between the central anti-Chinese organising committee in Brisbane and any grass-roots organisation in Ipswich. In a study of colonial Ipswich, Brad Bowden has shown how the local ruling class maintained an iron grip over the politics and social order of the town using a mixture of paternalism and repression.⁴²

William Ginn, the merchant, did not have a clue about how to build support and raise funds for the strike. As if to mock later historians, he did not approach the miners' union, nor miners themselves, but the editor of the town's conservative newspaper. Together with the editor, they organised a public meeting. There were no

³⁷ See Denis Cryle, *The press in colonial Queensland: A social and political history 1845-1875*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia (Qld), 1989, esp. pp. 122-4; on p. 127 describes the paper in 1871 as a 'rabid' supporter of the Conservative Palmer.

³⁸ QT 26 November 1878.

³⁹ QT 26 November 1878.

⁴⁰ QT 4 January 1879.

⁴¹ QT 12 December 1878

⁴² "'Some mysterious terror': The relationship between capital and labour in Ipswich, 1861-96", *Labour History*, no. 72, May 1997, pp. 77-100.

trade unionists reported present on the official platform; indeed Ginn and Irwin even seem to have been reluctant to involve some of the town's Liberals. At the public meeting, Archibald Meston, who had been a Liberal candidate in the recent election, complained that he had not been approached to speak. Ginn's attitude to trade unions may be gathered by comments he made at the public meeting:

Personally he (Mr. Ginn) was not in favour of strikes like those which he had frequently seen take place in the old country. They were injurious to the men themselves, to their employers, and to trade and their pernicious influences extended far beyond the immediate places in which they took place.⁴³

But this was a struggle for life, for the future of the British seaman.

In order to whip up support for the public meeting, the *Queensland Times* ran a fiery editorial. The ASN Company was threatening

to deprive us of the possibility of rearing a hardy race of Australian seamen – without whom we could scarcely hope in the future to take our place among the Anglo-Saxon communities predestined, from appearances, to be the ruling powers of the world... The company seem to have forgotten that if capital has its rights, it also has its duties.⁴⁴

The paper nervously appealed to its right wing audience:

There is a vast difference between the present and ordinary strikes. The latter are commonly for increased wages or shorter hours; the one now in existence is for a principle in which every working man in the colony is more or less interested.

Thus, 'there should be no scruple in the mind of any opposer of strikes which would prevent him from contributing towards the support of the seamen'.⁴⁵ It is doubtful that the paper's appeal had much impact; in its subsequent report, there was no mention of the size of the meeting, suggesting it was not encouraging; a modest £9 was raised – of which £5 came from one obviously well-to-do individual.⁴⁶ The paper felt obliged to address the lack of working class involvement; it published a 'letter' from 'A coal miner' on the need for the miners to take action.⁴⁷

There was, eventually, a meeting called on the issue for Ipswich's many coal miners. Rather than the town hall, the venue was 'a green near the Immigration Depot'. The anxiety of the miners was palpable; they

⁴³ QT 19 December 1878.

⁴⁴ Editorial, QT 17 December 1878.

⁴⁵ Editorial, QT 17 December 1878.

⁴⁶ QT 19 December 1878.

⁴⁷ QT 19 December 1878.

appeared to be very backward in taking any decisive steps in the matter. Some present seemed to think that the seamen, after striking, should have sought the interest and co-operation of the coal miners. Others again feared that their employment would be lost, and they, with their families, be rendered destitute.⁴⁸

In the end, they agreed only to invite the Brisbane seamen to send a speaker to inform them of the facts of the matter, while the braver of them argued that if they did take action, the local strike support committee, run by the town bourgeoisie, should support them on the same basis as the seamen.⁴⁹ These issues were further discussed a few days later in a letter by an erstwhile coal miner. In his view, many of the miners feared that action against ASN would end in failure; that mines which refused coal to ASN would be undermined by other local mines which would step in to supply the company.⁵⁰

It is clear from the unusual silences in the paper that its stand was far from universally supported by the local ruling class. Its political pin-up, John Malbon Thompson, was strangely absent from all the paper's reporting of the ASN dispute. He had opposed the 1877 Act on the liberal grounds of free trade and the right of people to move freely around the world. It was admitted that contributions for the strikers were weaker than in other centres, and the paper was forced to mention the efforts of Liberals the paper hated.⁵¹ However, there were no letters published protesting against the paper's position. When the compromise was announced, the paper 'rejoice[d] that the company have been defeated.'⁵²

Conclusion

The majority of the rich and powerful came to oppose Chinese – and later all non-European – immigration to the Australian colonies. The newspapers they controlled were saturated with anti-Asian racism. At decisive moments, such as the Seamen's strike of 1878-9, most of the major newspapers they controlled supported the strike, despite their dislike for unions and strikes. They did this for their own reasons, in pursuit of their own, class agendas for expanding capitalism on this continent, and strengthening the state that would help advance it. The attitudes expressed by Queensland's conservative newspapers are a microcosm of this.

The mythology surrounding labour's role in White Australia has had many serious impacts. One has been that racialised people have hesitated to see the labour movement as an essential ally in the struggle against racism. Equally importantly, the

⁴⁸ *QT* 21 December 1878.

⁴⁹ Report in *QT* 21 December 1878.

⁵⁰ *QT* 24 December 1878.

⁵¹ *QT* 21 December 1878.

⁵² *QT*, editorial, 4 January 1879.

pivotal role of the ruling class in the construction of racism has been hidden. Just consider this boast from John Howard in 1995, months before his election as Prime Minister: 'it was the Coalition which finally put an end to Labor's White Australia policy.'⁵³ Of course, our former prime minister never was an enthusiast for historical facts. But the larger issue here is the ability of a free trade conservative to claim purity on White Australia – a man, incidentally, who personally campaigned in support of White Australia in the 1960s – and get away with it. In fact, John Howard's politics very closely mirror the politics that led to the adoption of laws restricting Chinese immigration in the 1880s and the White Australia policy itself from 1901.

The labour movement did play a significant role in the campaign for a white Australia policy, but it did not take the lead. Labor's boasting about White Australia has rightly given way to a sense of shame about it. But the greatest shame lies elsewhere, with the forerunners of those who sent the navy against refugees and the SAS against the Tampa. The struggle against racism in Australia can only be strengthened by a reappraisal of its class origins. Such a reappraisal might also give us a richer understanding of our history.

⁵³ 'A reflection on the national identity debate', speech given in Melbourne, 13 December 1995. In fact, the Immigration Restriction Act, the legal basis for implementing the White Australia policy, was formulated by a Protectionist government – the fore-runner of the modern Liberal party, and supported by both the Labor party and the Opposition Free Trade party, the major debate being about the form exclusion would take.